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THE UNITY OF THE ARAMAIC ACTS

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The most interesting contribution to New Testament criticism in recent times has come from a scholar in another field. Professor Torrey, a student of Semitics and particularly of the Aramaic, the language of the common people in Palestine before and after the Christian era, has propounded a new theory regarding the Book of Acts.¹ Chapters 1 1b — 15 35 are thought by him to have comprised an Aramaic book written about 49 or 50 A.D., which Luke later procured in Palestine and translated as faithfully as he was able, at the same time adding the remaining chapters himself in Greek on the basis of his own knowledge and investigation. The two parts of the book are accordingly designated I and II Acts, respectively. The evidence for the hypothesis is primarily linguistic. A striking series of Aramaisms and of mistranslations which can be plausibly corrected on the basis of the Aramaic, is found in I Acts, while in II Acts the reflections of Aramaic idiom are rare and instances of mistranslation are wholly lacking. The literature of the subject is not yet large, but a careful résumé and discussion of the new theory has appeared from the pen of Professor Foakes-Jackson.² Since he questions the validity of Professor Torrey's more important deductions —conclusions whose correctness had been accepted almost

¹ C. C. Torrey, *The Composition and Date of Acts*, Harvard Theological Studies, No. 1 (1917).

² In an article entitled "Professor C. C. Torrey on the Acts," *Harvard Theological Review*, October, 1917, pp. 352-361.

without qualification by the present writer³—a further consideration of their claims to credence may be permissible.

The epoch-making consequences of the theory Professor Foakes-Jackson sees clearly and states with generous frankness. To be sure, the term “orthodox” could be applied quite as appropriately to “our previous ideas of the date not only of Acts, but of the written synoptic tradition,” as it can to the view newly promulgated, namely, “that Acts was completed by A.D. 64.” But of course even these “previous ideas” have not been an *undisputed* orthodoxy, nor has the recent inclination to date Acts, and by implication most or all of the synoptics, after the year 70, always prevailed. There was an earlier stage of New Testament criticism which confidently placed these books in the second century. Later a dating between 75 and 85 became customary, and it is probably this which Professor Foakes-Jackson is somewhat loth to give up. But even before the Aramaic theory was promulgated, Professor Harnack, who formerly put Acts after 70 A.D., had come to the opinion that it was written before the Jewish war and soon after Paul’s imprisonment. Professor Torrey’s pronouncement in favor of a date as early as 64 A.D. seems thus but the culmination of a prevailing tendency in criticism to place this book progressively earlier in the Christian development. For New Testament criticism, we should do well to remember, furnishes almost as instructive a field for the tracing of historical tendency in the guise of successively asserted and rejected “orthodoxies” as does the collection of documents with which that criticism deals.

Professor Foakes-Jackson, while readily and gratefully accepting the demonstration of Aramaic sources for

³ In an article entitled “Some Observations on the Aramaic Acts,” Harvard Theological Review, January, 1918, pp. 74–99. This was written before, though published after, the appearance of Professor Foakes-Jackson’s treatment.

certain portions of Acts 1–15 35, is extremely doubtful that there was one continuous Aramaic document underlying these chapters. The question is one of prime importance. Naturally not every sentence or paragraph betrays the fact of translation by reflecting Aramaic idiom. Now Professor Foakes-Jackson shows an inclination to clear away all such indications from chapters 13–15, and more or less succeeds in doing so except for the sermon at Pisidian Antioch, “of which an Aramaic report may have been preserved,” and the account of the Apostolic Council, “which may have been in Aramaic.” These facts, he feels, militate against a belief in “the absolute unity of the Aramaic document.”

It will be admitted that over against this theory of a patchwork of sources, some in Aramaic and some presumably in Greek, the original theory of Professor Torrey regarding I Acts has one great advantage, that of simplicity; and other things being equal, the simpler theory has the better claim to credence. The decision hinges ultimately on two main problems: (1) the degree of literary and artistic unity discoverable in the section 1–15 35, and (2) the psychological conceivability of such a process of slavishly literal and yet none too accurate translation as is here postulated on the part of Luke, the companion of Paul. In the circumstances these general questions may really be more important than that minute investigation “into questions of sources” which Professor Foakes-Jackson suggests as necessary “before conceding the homogeneity of the Aramaic document.” No one will deny the necessity of studying minutiae in the search for sources, and yet the fact remains that detailed reconstructions are seldom convincing in their details. Only the larger facts of literary relationship and influence, such as can be deduced from the broad general indications of the material in question, can usually be recovered satisfactorily.

The point of view and purpose of the Aramaic document as a whole have been admirably stated by Professor Torrey himself,⁴ and yet it is possible that the argument for unity may be put a little more strongly even than he has made it. Assuming for purposes of investigation that his theory is correct, we seem to find running through the work two principal *motifs*: (1) the spiritual baptism with its accompanying glossolalia, and (2) the question of Gentile admissibility. In a previous discussion concerning the origin of the ascension narrative⁵ an attempt was made to indicate something of the significance of the baptism of the Holy Spirit in the second great stage of early Christianity. The Pentecostal outpouring is described in Acts with all the pomp and circumstance of which the Aramaic author is capable. The narrative

⁴ "A man of Judea, presumably of Jerusalem, undertook to set forth the main facts touching the growth of the Christian church from the little band of Jews left behind by Jesus to the large and rapidly growing body, chiefly Gentile, whose branches were in all parts of the world. He was a man of catholic spirit and excellent literary ability. He wrote in Aramaic, and with great loyalty to the Holy City and the Twelve Apostles, and yet at the same time with genuine enthusiasm for the mission to the Gentiles and its foremost representatives, especially Paul. His chief interest was in the universal mission of Christianity. He was secondarily interested to show —what the far-seeing among the Jewish Christians of his time must generally have acknowledged—that although the new faith was first developed, of necessity, among the Jews, yet being rejected by the main body of them it passed out of their hands. From the very beginning of his account, he had in mind as its central feature the wonderful transition from Jewish sect to world-religion. From the outset he purposed to show how Antioch became the first great Gentile centre of Christianity; his pride in Antioch was of course hardly equal to his pride in Jerusalem, but was very real nevertheless. It is a skilful arrangement of his material by which he makes it all lead up, in successive steps, to the first great triumphs of the new faith on foreign soil, and to the true climax in chapter 15."—Pp. 64 f.

"There is good reason to believe that in 15 35 we have the original conclusion of Luke's Aramaic source. This is the natural place for the Judean document to come to an end, for the story of the first distinct period of the Christian church in Jerusalem has been written. Peter has initiated the work among the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas have gained their first great successes as foreign missionaries. The Mother Church has sent out its circular letter, voicing its own supreme authority and at the same time making Gentile Christianity permanently free from the regulations of Judaism. The verses 15 30-35 are admirably suited to bring the book to a close. The Gentiles, represented by the foremost Gentile Christian city, Antioch, receive their charter of freedom with joy; Judas and Silas return to Jerusalem; Paul and Barnabas remain in Antioch, 'teaching and preaching, with many others, the word of the Lord.'”—P. 64.

⁵ In the *Harvard Theological Review*, January, 1918, pp. 77, 94-99.

of the ascension serves as a prelude to it. The choosing of Matthias is but another necessary preliminary, bringing the college of apostles up again to the full sacred number of twelve. Finally on the day of Pentecost, the anniversary according to the rabbis of the giving of the law, comes the miraculous gift of the Spirit with visible tongues of fire and the noise as of a mighty wind. The inspired utterances are intelligible to sojourners in Jerusalem from twelve representative regions of the known world,⁶ beginning beyond the eastern confines of the Roman empire and culminating in Rome itself, thus symbolizing at the very start the universal mission of the new religion. Peter is able at once to explain the true inward significance of the occurrence: it has been virtually the first act of the risen and exalted Jesus to claim from God, his Father, the previously promised Spirit and to pour it out on his disciples waiting below. "This Jesus did God raise up, whereof we all are witnesses. Being therefore by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured it forth, as ye see and hear."⁷ In fact, Peter sees through the whole matter from the very start, taking no time apparently for reflection or to await developments. And he is ready with the practical application. At the close of his sermon he assures his hearers that if they repent and are baptized they also shall receive this same gift of the Holy Spirit.

All this is manifestly enough artificial, an imaginary reconstruction of an early period from the standpoint of a later one. The interesting aspect of the matter for the present purpose is this, that it is all so self-consistent on its own premises, so patently designed for a definite

⁶ Professor Harnack is surely right in suggesting the rejection of the references to "Judea" in verse 9 and to the "Cretans and Arabians" in verse 11, thus leaving an even twelve, again the sacred number.

⁷ Acts 2 32 f.

apologetical and homiletical purpose. Whatever earlier records he may have used—and an opinion has been expressed elsewhere regarding two cases which throw light on the problem of sources⁸—it is clear that this author has controlled his sources, and not been controlled by them; he has skilfully adapted his material to his own ends. For some reason or other he has conceived of the spiritual baptism as a thing of paramount importance in the Christian movement, and has set it forth with all possible prominence and emphasis in the forefront of his history.

At the other end of the document stands the famous Jerusalem Council, at which the question of Gentile admissibility was settled favorably to the party of progress. That it was a genuine triumph, and not a mere compromise, seems clear from the critical investigation of the text of the Apostolic Decree.⁹ If, as seems most probable, the three-clause text was the original,¹⁰ then the decision was wholly in favor of Paul and the liberal party, and the requirements still enjoined upon the Gentiles were not a mixture of the ceremonial and the moral, but simply an injunction to avoid the three deadly sins, idolatry, fornication, and murder. This interpretation alone makes the letter (Acts 15:23–29) in which the decree is embodied, self-consistent; for verse 24 very explicitly repudiates the doctrine of the self-appointed teachers from Judæa, who had tried to impose circumcision (verse 1), and by implication the whole Jewish law (cf. verse 5), upon the Antiochean Christians. Such explicit repudiation of the legalists hardly comports with a final decision which only established a compromise. The deliberate judgment of James

⁸ *Harvard Theological Review*, January, 1918, pp. 89 ff.

⁹ *Acts* 15:29.

¹⁰ See Lake, *Earlier Epistles of St. Paul*, pp. 48 ff., who rejects *πνικτῶν* as a gloss.

(verse 19) is expressed in terms which point in the same direction: "Wherefore my judgment is, that we trouble not those who from among the Gentiles turn to God." This sounds less like a compromise than a complete abandonment of the legalistic position with respect to Gentile Christians.

If such a view of the report of the Apostolic Council be correct, one of Professor Foakes-Jackson's objections to the Torreyan theory is greatly weakened, if not wholly met. He says: "Dr. Torrey points out . . . the impossibility of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 having been so described by a companion of Paul's. But does not Dr. Torrey ignore the difficulty of accounting for a close friend of Paul's having incorporated into his narrative so damaging a statement as that relating to the proceedings of the Apostles and the promulgation of the letter to the churches of Syria and Cilicia?"¹¹ If, however, the result of the Council was a complete triumph, at least temporarily, for the Pauline party, the force of this objection is largely broken. Of course this is not the whole of the question. It ramifies interminably, involving ultimately such large problems as the date and destination of Galatians. Into these issues it is impossible to enter here. Suffice it to say that to a "South-Galatian" who is willing to date that epistle *before* the Apostolic Council, who identifies the "interview" of Galatians 2 with the "famine visit" of Acts 11 30 and 12 25, and who accepts the three-clause text of the Apostolic Decree, there are no very serious difficulties in the way of supposing either that a companion of Paul wrote the fifteenth chapter of Acts or that such a person incorporated it into his book—always remembering that a friend and com-

¹¹ P. 358. However, if I read aright, Professor Torrey at the beginning of his second chapter is not so much giving his own judgment on the varying Christology and style of the different parts of Acts and the incompatibility of Acts 15 with Galatians 2, as simply reviewing the reasons, cogent and otherwise, which have led to the so prevalent opinion that II Acts is composite.

panion of Paul need by no means have been Paul's mere echo.¹²

The report of the Apostolic Council, which ended in a sweeping triumph for the liberal view, is the climax of the Aramaic book. It was, to be sure, a temporary triumph, as such victories are rather wont to be. The opposition was momentarily crushed, overwhelmed by the authority of Peter and the mass of evidence presented by Barnabas and Paul; but as we well know, it was by no means completely destroyed. Now our Aramaic author was not a trained historian, capable of foreseeing that opposition thus crushed would inevitably break out again in other and perhaps violent forms. Rather he was persuaded that a solid and lasting victory had been won for those principles of universalism and anti-legalism in which he so earnestly believed. And in the first flush of his enthusiasm—presumably before the opposition had assumed its later and more sinister forms—he wrote his book as a celebration and justification of the splendid triumph. The air of fresh enthusiasm which pervades

¹² A note may be intruded at this point regarding another objection raised by Professor Foakes-Jackson in the same paragraph (p. 359)—“the problem of reconciling Acts 28 17 ad fin. with all that is elsewhere known of Paul's attitude toward the Jewish leaders. How could a disciple of Paul who knew of the Epistle to the Romans, make the Jewish elders of Rome ignorant not only of his existence but of that of the Christian sect?” There is a certain exegesis of the passage, however, which relieves it of these supposed implications. In 28 17-20 Paul is apparently anxious lest his Jewish accusers at Jerusalem should already have sent to the Jews at Rome a prejudicial statement regarding his character and past conduct. He is anxious to anticipate such a report if it has not already come, or to meet and answer it if it has. But the Jewish leaders assure him (verse 21) that no such report has come either by letter or by messenger, and they express their desire to hear his teachings; “for as concerning this sect, it is known to us that everywhere it is spoken against” (verse 22). Does this indeed imply ignorance of the existence of the Christian sect, or quite the reverse? Does it not in the plainest possible terms imply considerable hearsay knowledge concerning the sect, mostly of a prejudicial character; and does not their desire to hear Paul's doctrines even suggest that perhaps they knew of him already by reputation as a leader in the new movement and so able to give them authoritative information? At any rate verse 21 need not mean at all that they had never heard of Paul, but only that no adverse report concerning him had preceded him from Judea: “We neither received letters from Judea concerning thee, nor did any of the brethren come hither and report or speak any harm of thee.” In any case, Paul's tactful and earnest effort to conciliate the Roman Jews and win their confidence, before turning to the Gentiles, seems quite in accord with his usual custom elsewhere.

the book suggests that it was written soon after the Council of 49 A.D., and is if anything a stronger consideration than the argument based on the references to Silas in Acts 15 33 and 40.¹³ The two considerations reinforce each other; but the matter of the movements of Silas impressed me at first, before I had caught the spirit of the book as a whole and could judge of its tendencies, as a rather slender argument for the date assigned.

These then are the two *motifs* of the Aramaic book. The Pentecostal narrative stands as an imposing prelude, recounting the original gift of the Holy Spirit. The Apostolic Council stands as a dramatic finale, irrevocably committing Christianity to its universal mission. Nor are these two leading ideas confined to the beginning and the end, respectively. On the contrary, they dominate the whole work. The doctrine of spiritual baptism, so impressively illustrated on Pentecost, recurs at frequent intervals thereafter, notably in Acts 4 31 (which is in its outward manifestation almost a second Pentecost), 5 32 (almost a second Pentecostal sermon), 8 15 ff. (Simon tries to purchase the gift), 9 17 (the Spirit promised to Paul), 10 38 (God anointed *Jesus* with the Holy Spirit and with power), 10 44 ff. (the case of Cornelius; cf. 11 4-18), 15 8 (Peter's speech at the Council). Likewise the other great theme of the book, the universal destiny of Christianity, is indicated in a long series of premonitions, notably 1 8 ("witnesses . . . unto the uttermost part of the earth"), 2 9 f. (the geographical list of sojourners), 2 39 ("the promise . . . to all that are afar off"), 3 25 ("In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed"), 6 14 (Stephen accused of predicting the abolition of the law), 8 4 ff. (Samaria receives the

¹³ So Torrey, p. 68, who finds it very significant that the Aramaic author "did not know that Silas had started on a new missionary journey in company with Paul. A man of his interests and information could not have remained for many months in ignorance of this most important turn of events." Hence a date late in the year 49, or early in the year 50.

word), 10 9-16, 28, 34 (the vision of Peter and his visit to Cornelius), 11 18 ("Then to the Gentiles also hath God granted repentance"), 11 20 (missionary work among the Greeks), 13 39, 46 ("Lo, we turn to the Gentiles"), 14 27 ("opened a door of faith unto the Gentiles"), before the final acceptance of the principle in chapter 15. Moreover—and this is the highly significant feature—the two ideas which thus run through the whole book are causally interconnected in the author's mind. The glossolalia is decked out in its festal Pentecostal garb and accorded such peculiar prominence, precisely because of its bearing on the Gentile controversy. At the Apostolic Council it is Peter's testimony that turns the scale (cf. Acts 15 14), and Peter's argument is based solidly on his experience in this matter of the Spirit. He feels sure that God from ancient times intended to admit the Gentiles to salvation, and the experimental proof is this, that under Peter's preaching the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit, glossolalia and all, exactly as had the Jews. That had been the line of Peter's defence against the criticisms of his Jerusalem compatriots at an earlier time: that the Spirit made no racial distinctions (Acts 11 12). This had forced his critics to the logically inevitable conclusion, "Then to the Gentiles also hath God granted repentance unto life" (verse 18). The test case had been that of Cornelius and his household, who had actually received the Holy Spirit and spoken with tongues before being so much as baptized (Acts 10 44-48). The importance of that case was fully recognized. There is no reason to doubt the essential fact, but it is dressed up with an elaboration of visions and legends—and incidentally of repetitions—which is paralleled only in the Pentecostal narrative and in that other incident of profound importance to the liberal cause, namely, the conversion of Paul. The fact that these three earlier points of critical significance in the history—Pentecost, Paul's con-

version, and the case of Cornelius—are so thickly encrusted with legend, while the story of the Apostolic Council is so straightforward and matter-of-fact, furnishes another reason for dating the Aramaic book soon after the last-named event. The Aramaic author may well have been present. At any rate, there had not been time for legendary accretions to gather.

The literary and artistic unity of the Aramaic document is thus seen to be very great. It is a closely knit work showing the characteristic contour which we have been trained to expect in the best products of the dramatic art. Its two leading *motifs*, brought into special prominence, the one at the beginning and the other at the end of the narrative, are found on close scrutiny to run through the whole and to be conjoined logically and causally at the point of climactic interest just a little beyond the middle. So far as this problem is concerned, the case stands well with the theory of a unified document.

The other problem is more difficult, though the answer, such as it is, can be given in briefer space. Is it conceivable that Luke, or any other person, should have taken a document of this sort and translated it literally word for word, not intentionally altering it at a single point, and should then have gone on to complete the narrative and indirectly to correct some of the misstatements when occasion presented? The supposition is not an easy one, and yet who shall set logical limits to the things of which the human mind is capable? Certainly no modern scholar would treat a document in such a peculiar way; and yet that is no reason why Luke, an enthusiastic early Christian, a believer in miracles and all the rest, should not have done so. Perhaps there are even certain reasons why he should have done precisely this thing. In the first place, recall the artistic unity of the document with which he was dealing, and imagine what a powerful

and fascinating effect it must have had upon his mind, he being himself a member of the liberal party. In comparison with the brilliance of its great main thesis any minor errors of detail must have seemed trivial in the extreme, and to have stopped here and there to make corrections in so truly inspired a work would have bordered on sacrilege. I doubt if it was necessary to hesitate at the word "sacred"¹⁴ as a description of Luke's feeling for so powerful and edifying a book.

Another aspect of the psychological objection is brought up by Professor Foakes-Jackson in the following words: "That Luke translated this [document] with meticulous accuracy, adding nothing of importance of his own and adapting nothing to prove those points which he desired to establish, is, judging by his use of Mark and Q, to me at least incredible."¹⁵ At first sight this point seems weighty. In both cases Luke had before him a completed document to serve as his fundamental basis: Mark for his gospel and the Aramaic book for Acts. Unquestionably he used Mark as the framework for his first composition, omitting useless or undesirable portions, occasionally rearranging the order, and interlarding the work plentifully with material from other sources—probably from several others. Then why not also in Acts? And yet after all the two cases are hardly similar. For one thing, Mark was no such skilfully constructed piece of writing as was the Aramaic history. Also, the rich "logian" material now in Luke's Gospel had to be inserted somewhere *inside of the Markan framework* if it was to be included at all; whereas the material which Luke had to contribute to the book of Acts belonged almost exclusively to the period *after the Apostolic Council*. Hence the temptation to disturb the closely woven

¹⁴ So Foakes-Jackson, p. 352: "To Luke it was so important—I had almost said so sacred—that he did not presume to alter a word when he made his literal translation."

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 360.

texture of the Aramaic history was minimized. There was another factor working in the same direction. The Gospel of Mark, when employed by Luke, had required a good deal in the way of adaptation, for it was a record from a much earlier time and contained many things ill-suited to this later age. But in the case of the Aramaic document this work of adaptation had already been done. It was much nearer to Luke in point of time, and he was apparently in full accord with its fundamental "tendencies." In this case, therefore, no changes "to prove those points which he desired to establish" would appear to have been necessary. Thus there remain only certain minor errors of detail that would naturally seem to Luke to call for correction. Some such corrections he made quietly at appropriate points in his own section of the work; for example, the matter of the movements of Silas, and the facts regarding the conversion of Paul. Some other errors, such as the reference to the "forty days," he neglected altogether. To have altered that passage in order to bring it into harmony with the close of his own Gospel would have impaired the symbolism of the entire opening section of Acts, and Luke's scientific impulses were surely not strong enough for such heroic measures as that. The living unity of the document itself — plus the never-to-be-forgotten factor of human inertia — sufficed to protect it at that point.

When all is said and done, the fact remains that the psychology of Luke as translator and author, respectively, of the two parts of Acts is somewhat difficult; but the difficulties are nowhere nearly so great as on the older supposition that the author of the Third Gospel had in Acts composed freely a second work and adapted its sources to suit his own theories. On that supposition the "forty days," the conversion narratives, and the statements about Silas were absolutely insoluble puzzles.

And to seek escape from these troubles by denying the identity of authorship of Luke and Acts was to fly in the face of all the evidence, both external and stylistic, bearing on that problem. Thus, while the psychology of Luke is still a thing to be explained and accounted for, the case on the whole is very much improved. On the other hand, the literary unity of the rediscovered Aramaic document seems unmistakable and waiting only to be recognized and appreciated. When to the great mass of linguistic evidence are added this literary evidence and a greatly simplified psychology, the argument for the new theory of Acts appears very strong indeed.